

## **For Immediate Release**

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### **Taking Care of YOU: Five Ways that Caregivers Can Stay Healthy and Bypass the Pitfalls (Power Naps Included!)**

*If you've ever taken care of a terminally ill loved one, then you probably know what a challenging job it can be. The difficulties of day-to-day caregiving can present major challenges, and if you're not careful, they can start to drag you down. Read on for five simple ways that caregivers can take care of themselves—and keep the circle of healing going.*

**Winston-Salem, NC** (April 2010)—It's a calling. Ask anyone who works in the healthcare profession and they will likely tell you that their work is born from a desire to help people, to nurture the sick, to heal the ailing. Caregiving is not for the faint of heart; it's grueling, dirty, all-guts-little-glory work. The hours are long, the days are hard, and the mental and physical strain are tough on the human body. So for those people who are suddenly forced into that position, due to a loved one's diagnosis of a chronic or terminal illness, it can be one of the hardest challenges they ever face.

In the midst of all this work—the doctor's appointments, the midnight pharmacy runs, the constant cleaning and sanitizing—caregivers often forget to actually take care of one of the most important pieces of the caregiving puzzle: themselves. It's a mistake that author and speaker Joni Aldrich says can—literally—be the difference between saving and losing someone you love.

“In 2004, my husband, Gordon, was diagnosed with cancer,” says Joni Aldrich, author of *The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95). “In one day, my life changed completely. I was Gordon's primary caregiver through two years of cancer treatment, three out-patient stem cell transplants, and, finally, during the difficult weeks at home with hospice after his cancer metastasized to his brain. There were times that he couldn't walk. There were times when we went to the emergency room in the middle of the night. There were times when he refused to eat, but I had to force him to take nourishment to keep up his strength. And a lot of times, in the midst of all that was going on, I forgot to take care of myself—which can be a slippery slope for any caregiver.”

In 2006, her husband, Gordon, lost his two-year battle with cancer. Her book *The Saving of Gordon* tells the story of the Aldrich family's experiences while simultaneously offering valuable step-by-step advice that will give readers the tools they need to have a fighting chance against cancer. It also includes valuable information on how to be an effective caregiver.

Here are some suggestions from Aldrich on how to maintain your health and attitude while functioning as a primary caregiver:

**Rest is critical.** When you are caring for someone who is ill, your own needs tend to fall to the backburner. As you try to fit in full-time caregiving with the demands of an already busy life, things like sleep can become a low priority. However, Aldrich says that failing to get enough rest will risk harm to the care receiver as well as your own personal health. She says that it's important to remember that the hours that your care receiver needs you will be erratic. A nap or two during the day will give the patient much-needed rest, but might keep him up at night. Try to sleep when the patient does.

"When faced with the task of caregiving, many people run their health into the ground," explains Aldrich. "The mental stress and emotional anguish can make sleep hard to come by. Make rest a priority for yourself as well. And if you take a sleep aid at night, that medication must not keep you from being able to function; there were situations when I had to take Gordon to the hospital in the middle of the night and needed to have my wits about me. This goes for excessive alcohol, too."

**Caregiver—heal thyself.** There are a lot of details that go into managing someone with a serious illness. Between doctor's visits, modified diets, and multiple prescriptions, there are a lot of very important, yet very complicated details for caregivers to remember. And while the focus is on the patient (and rightfully so!), many caregivers forget to take care of themselves. It's not uncommon for those in a deep caring situation to forget to take their own medications or forget to show up for their own doctor's appointments!

"Remind yourself that if you become ill, you will only add to an already stressful situation," suggests Aldrich. "Taking care of your mental and physical needs is critical. The one time that I got really sick, I tried to take precautions and stay away from my husband. He caught the flu, and—because his cancer was in his bones—he suffered from multiple fractured ribs. That's a heavy burden, and a reminder that your health can directly affect the patient."

**Food for thought.** If you're walking the walk with someone who is suffering from a serious illness, you're bound to face plenty of nerve-wracking events like tests, surgeries, and just plain old bad days. Nerves affect people in different ways. And—while hospitals do offer healthy food—your own idea of comfort food might lead you to make unhealthy choices. Aldrich says that it's important for caregivers to be mindful of their food choices—to try to eat healthy foods and take vitamins to supplement your diet.

“I found out firsthand that eating every time the care receiver eats might not be the best idea,” she says. “I gained weight; and all that did was make me more miserable and depressed. And while a consistent diet of high-calorie foods isn’t good, sometimes you need a little wedge of chocolate to feel better. It’s all about balance.”

**Ask for help when you need it.** Caregivers are the support system for their patients. They are depended on totally and completely, and that in itself can be a draining experience. There will be times when you need to lean on someone yourself—and not just professional care providers, but also on your family and friends. Aldrich says to remember that it’s okay to ask for help. In fact, she recommends making a complete list of available resources. Amazingly, recent studies show that only a small percentage of long-term caregivers go to support groups or individual counseling. Whether that’s because of time constraints, needs of the care receiver, or lack of knowing where to get help, it’s a sad oversight, and one that should be amended.

“I’ll be the first to admit that I was unaware of how close to breaking down I was through the day-to-day rigors of taking care of Gordon and working full-time,” recounts Aldrich. “Letting the emotions out while with the patient may be too traumatic for her, but you must find a time and place to do it. You also need to spend quality time away from the patient. Don’t feel guilty if you find an opportunity to go out to dinner or go to a movie. Always remember that you’re a human being without super-human powers.”

**Work it out.** It’s been said before, but it warrants being said again. Exercise is an incredible source of stress relief and holds numerous health benefits. It will help to keep you strong, keep your immune system healthy, and will provide you with an outlet for some much-needed release. It’s also a great way to get some time alone to decompress and get away for a little while from everything else that you may be dealing with.

“Finding a gym close to wherever you are may be challenging, but walking up and down hospital corridors doesn’t require relocation to work your muscles,” says Aldrich. “I had to stay strong, because my patient weighed 280 pounds. While I couldn’t lift him, I had to help support him. Being a caregiver is frequently about being creative. Your talents will often be challenged while you attempt to maintain a normal life balance.”

“One of the most important things to remember is that if you become sick or fall apart, the ‘second string quarterback’ will have to be called in to take over. That’s not an easy situation, because no one knows your patient better than you. Caregivers wear many hats—you have to be a pharmaceutical specialist, master scheduler, creative chef, patient friend, and confidant. There are difficult days and impossible ones. The key to being an effective caregiver is staying well, staying focused, and maintaining some level of sanity in the madness. By taking care of yourself, you’re taking one of the most important steps toward giving your loved one the best care possible. No, being Gordon’s caregiver was not easy, but I wouldn’t have changed places with anyone else in the world during that time.”

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**About the Author:**

Joni James Aldrich believes that she has been preparing to write *The Saving of Gordon* for most of her life. As a child, she was a better than average student. She wrote dramatic poetry. Before college, she worked at a newspaper. In her professional career, she has worked in analysis, documentation, communications, and public speaking. She has also been able to incorporate her love of photography into the design of her books. However, her real motivation for writing *The Saving of Gordon* was two years of crisis in the cancer school of hard knocks. She feels it is her destiny to relay this story to readers in a way that will help them in their own cancer journeys. It is her hope that someday that journey will no longer be necessary for anyone.

Joni is also the author of *The Cancer Patient W-I-N Book: Our Cancer Fight Journal* and *The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm Called "Grief."*

**For more information, please visit [www.thecancerlifeline.com](http://www.thecancerlifeline.com) and [www.griefbeacon.com](http://www.griefbeacon.com).**

**About the Book:**

*The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95) is available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.